

Up close Nancey Green Leigh, professor of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Tech

'You need a diversified economic base'

Scholar says schools, transportation, water keys to metro growth.

By Michael E. Kanell
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She has one foot in the city near her work at Georgia Tech, one in the country. A 25th floor condo on 14th Street in Atlanta, where she spends several days a week; a home in Chattahoochee Hills, where her retired husband spends most of his time.

"It's a schizophrenic life," said Nancey Green Leigh.

But then, she never settled too long in one place while growing up. As a self-described "Air Force brat," she lived "north, south, east and west, on the U.S. mainland, as well as Hawaii."

Some people grow up thinking of their home city as normal. But, if you spend time in lots of places, you don't assume there is only one normal, she said. You see how different normal can be. "I think that's one of the reasons I got interested in planning."

She earned undergrad-

uate and master's degrees at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, then a master's in economics and a doctorate in planning at the University of California at Berkeley.

"I think of myself as an economic development planner," she said.

She came to Atlanta and Georgia Tech in 1994, becoming the first woman in Georgia nominated and elected to the American Institute of Certified Planners.

As a professor in Tech's School of City and Regional Planning, she has authored more than 50 articles and three books, including "Middle Class Decline: The Challenge to Economic Development Planning," and has testified before Congress.

Q: What are the most critical problems that Atlanta faces?

A: Transportation, water and education. If we don't want to become a Southern shrinking city, all three challenges must be overcome, but the k-12 issue is the most critical.

Q: But one large lure of Atlanta has always been the quality of life ...

A: That's too simple.



Meet Nancey Green Leigh

Job: Professor of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Tech

Age: 58

Family: two daughters, two dogs, two horses, two swans, one husband

Hobby: landscape artist

"Quality of life" here has meant that it costs less to buy a big house. I'd like to think that quality of life would mean we have well-paying jobs that let people buy that house. I think the region has to have better education or it will have a crisis.

Q: What do you think about the great growth Atlanta had for so long?

A: I know this is a dramatic image, but I see Atlanta's post-Olympic growth as being built on a house of cards that covered up the criti-

cal problems of water, transportation and k-12 education. The collapse of the real estate and development community revealed how illusory our growth machine was.

Q: But that growth machine brought millions of people here.

A: That sprawl may not be sustainable. What happens if gasoline goes to \$8 or \$10 a gallon? I think a lot of people will move away. We have to be much more strategic about growth. We need to make good decisions. We have seen declining real earnings compared to the previous generation. We could end up with a region that is shrinking. We could end up with a region that is growing, but people's incomes are declining.

Q: We are in a period where there is not likely to be lots of money to do massive government projects. What should cities do if they can't spend huge amounts of money?

A: Zoning. That is something that every city can begin doing. Making sure we have space ... for many things. One thing we've

never paid attention to is our industrial base. Manufacturing provides good wages, good tax revenues.

You need a diversified economic base. So you need to stop reducing the locations available. Right away.

Q: Someone at the Atlanta Regional Commission told me that congestion won't stop Atlanta and they used Los Angeles as an example. After all, L.A. has been a poster child for congestion since the 1960s.

A: L.A. is different. It has an ocean on one side, mountains not that far to the other side. It has kept growing largely because of immigration - some legal, some illegal which became legal in the second generation. I have a lot of trouble with the L.A. analogy.

While I'm more of the opinion that comparing Atlanta to Los Angeles is apples to oranges, given their very different geographic and industry profile, the fact that out-migration is exceeding immigration for L.A. suggests it is losing its best and brightest.

Q: Do you believe the

projections for Atlanta's continued growth? And how do you read those projections in the light of the current economy?

A: High population growth without employment growth suggests declining per capita income and growing poverty. Typically, projections are based on past trends and the question is whether the past trends will continue. If we are at a tipping point for the region, given the water, transportation, and school issues, then it could be very unlikely that they will.

A do-nothing scenario is one possibility, but we could also move towards a shrinking city.

It's great that we have such strength in logistics, but I would hope that rather than just moving goods in and out of our region, we would focus concerted attention to creating goods here that we export. We've neglected our manufacturing sector, which can be a source of good jobs for high school grads to those with Ph.D.s. This recession has brought home fully the dangers of having too narrow of an economy.